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AUTHOR Tebo-Messina, Margaret; Blough, Doris B.
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ABSTRACT

The idea behind this project created by two teachers of different age groups was that providing students with penpals would give students a real audience to write to and change their attitudes about writing. Seventh graders and college students exchanged letters and were required to send working drafts of some class assignments to each other to receive feedback on their writing. By the end of the project, each student had given and received feedback on several letters and drafts of a composition. The two groups did for one another what the teachers could never do: they engaged one another as writers because they personalized the act of reading and writing and, consequently, developed in ways that the teachers had not expected. Because they cared about being understood, they were motivated to pay attention to mechanics and content. Students learned that instead of ceremonially giving the teacher what she wanted, writing required effort. Tips for a successful penpal project include: make it easy to do; make it part of what would be done anyway; be flexible; be committed to seeing it through; be sure each person sends and receives a letter; build some time to step back and look at what is going on; and have a purpose in writing beyond the letter exchange. (MG)

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Penpals and Keypals--Networks for Student Writers

by

Dr. Margaret Tebo-Messina, Winthrop College

and

Doris B. Blough, York Junior High School

CS212403

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Audience Matters: A Junior High-College Penpal Project

What we now refer to as "our penpal project" began with a serendipitous meeting and chance conversation about writing instruction. During that talk we discovered that even though one of us teaches seventh graders and the other college students, even though we are members of two "different cultures" who, it is reported, often have trouble collaborating (Schultz 145), as writing teachers we could nevertheless commiserate with one another.

Doris' seventh graders too often expected English to be a meaningless ritual, requiring them only to spell twenty words they couldn't pronounce, memorize homophones they couldn't define, or identify adjectives in sentences they couldn't even read fluently. For Marge's grade-obsessed college students, writing had become torture, a ceremonial giving-the-teacher-what-she-wants, rather than an act of communication. And none of our students thought revision worthwhile: as Carrie, a seventh grader put it, "I don't write a paper and turn around and reread it. Cause I know what it is supposed to say." In short, before too many minutes had passed we knew that our classroom objectives were very much alike and we decided to "do something together."

Our primary goal was to provide each student with a REAL AUDIENCE. Penpals, we reasoned, would give the seventh graders a chance to correspond with real, live people--and not just people, but college students. For most of these rural youngsters, college was a remote place populated by adults who were going to make it big because they were so "smart." As for the college students, we hoped to confront them with both the need to respond thoughtfully to another's writing and the need to revise for an audience that matters.

Much has been written about how real world writing differs from school writing, how communicating a real message to a real audience contrasts with the

typical school fare of writing for "dummy purposes" to a "dummy audience" (Mayher 3). In Britton's seminal study, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*, more than 2,000 student texts were examined and classified by purpose and audience. While students addressed their work to several different readers (including themselves, a wider audience, and unknown groups), 49% of their texts were addressed to a TEACHER EXAMINER. This writing to an expert from a novice, "writing aimed at a verdict" rather than at communication (Britton 70), is artificial and forced, rather than genuine and spontaneous. As one seventh grader put it, "Teachers love reading over and correcting things. Then you have to rewrite it. That don't do nothin but mess up paper."

A steady diet of such composing for a teacher/ogre--real or imagined--lacks compelling purpose and severely restricts a writer's growth. Britton's work shows that students at the elementary and high school level need the opportunity to address a smorgasbord of audiences if they are to develop as writers; college students, we learned, need the same thing. In the following pages we will briefly describe our project (which we are about to do for the third time), summarize its benefits, and then offer some suggestions for others interested in a collaborative venture.

We agreed to exchange letters for a semester but, because we wanted to change our students' attitudes about writing, we knew that we needed a purpose beyond note swapping. Consequently, we required students to send their penpals working drafts of some class assignment--a poem or a persuasive essay, a short story or a riddle. By the end of the project, each student had given and received feedback on several letters and several drafts of a composition. The grand finale of the project was the seventh graders' campus visit to meet their penpals. The college students carefully planned and orchestrated the day so that they could show the younger students as much of college life as possible. Afterwards, the glories of the

visitors' experience spread by word of mouth to other classes, making them the envy of the junior high school for days.

One practical note: while our schools are in different towns, we avoided postage costs by prevailing on a private courier (a spouse) to deliver our mail. That way we had almost instant delivery service at a most reasonable rate--free. In fact, with the exception of copying and visiting costs absorbed by our institutions, and all those extras--phone calls, souvenirs, post cards--which our students got involved in during breaks and vacations, there was no cost involved.

But if the project was inexpensive, it was not ineffective. That first semester we were surprised to learn that our students' writing needs and responses were very similar. We had expected the college students might be blasé or bored by the whole idea, but whether they were freshmen or seniors certifying to teach English, they felt like Kay who wrote, "I thought this was an exciting chance to help influence children and hopefully do some good." Marge's students were as excited as the younger writers who, when Doris proposed our plan, stared at her in disbelief. Sarah explained how shocked she was: "I thought to myself, 'College students writing to a short little whimp like me? She has to be kidding.' But after I found out that she [penpal] was just a human as I was, I loved to write without feeling like a baby."

The two groups did for one another what we as teachers could never do: they ENGAGED one another as writers, because they PERSONALIZED the act of writing and reading, and consequently DEVELOPED in ways that we had not quite expected. Although these three benefits of the project are intertwined, we will highlight each of them in turn.

Our students ENGAGED each other as writers. Because they cared about being understood, they were motivated to pay attention to mechanics and content. Prompted to tell about themselves and to ask their penpals to do the same, the

seventh graders tackled the first letter with a will--for several minutes. Then the spectre of "correctness" reared its head. Suddenly "correctness" mattered. They became concerned about things they dimly recalled from letter writing lessons of earlier years: neatness and correct spelling, yes; observing the margins; but also, "Just whose address goes at the top, anyway?"

College students were equally worried about making a good impression:

> I can't say that I have ever written to an unknown audience before . . . . There were many things that I didn't write since I didn't know who I was writing to. Also, the things I did write, I worded in ways that wouldn't confuse or offend the person I was writing to--who ever it was.

For perhaps the first time, Marge's students wrote not to a teacher, friend or relative who knew them well and was a skilled reader, but to novices who might not understand. Consequently, what they wrote and how they wrote it mattered.

In spite of their care, however, the differences in ability were sometimes so great that misunderstanding arose for the seventh graders. After reading a paper on stereotyping, Kendra could only say that it was "something about stereos." Her penpal had serious rewriting to do if Kendra was to be the audience.

The letter exchange became very PERSONAL. Friendships developed as envelopes bulging with lollipops, gum, home addresses and phone numbers, invitations to basketball games, and pictures made their way back and forth between junior high and college. This one-on-one exchange transformed our incurious pupils into teachers and students of writing.

The personal touch was evident from the beginning in the seventh graders' efforts to not hurt the other's feelings and to do a satisfactory job: "I wanted to say the right thing. I was also trying to write neater than I ever have. All I wanted her to say about me is that she may be a smart child when she gets a little older."

The college students found their role of teacher unique. Bob, for example, wrote, "I was excited and impressed because the seventh grader wrote like she thought I was a higher being." Being looked up to, however, brought new and worrisome responsibilities which were taken very seriously: the hardest part of the project, in one student's words, was "to talk to [my penpal] about things that may [have] hurt her. This would include such things as informing her of mistakes in her writing and saying she should attend school more often."

Most important of all, our students DEVELOPED as writers. They learned that instead of meaningless ritual, writing was meaning making: as Dave (7th grade) put it, "[The hardest part of this project] was writing down what I was thinking. It wasn't all just writing, it was put it in words too!" Writing, it seemed, was no longer an empty act of transcribing for the teacher, but a struggle to communicate with a real reader.

Our students also learned that, instead of ceremonially giving-the-teacher-what-she-wanted, writing required effort. It became necessary to revise, to work at spelling, to "stop leavin out words" or to "simplify." And for the first time some, like Matt, felt a new need: "I had to really think about what I was writing. I always try to think but this time I had to be sincere because an older person can have a lot of influence on a seventh grader." Apparently, insincerity, fine for teachers, would not do for a real person, one who honestly valued what was said.

Was our project successful?

By the time those first introductory letters--so fraught with peril--were exchanged, our students were hooked. The project had created a "genuine social context, [without which] writing loses its function of communication and degenerates into mere exercises in which one is forced or encouraged to engage" (Black 233).

Rather than coercing our students to finish their correspondence, we found ourselves badgered with inquiries about the mail: "Did our letters come yet?"

Tips for a Successful Penpal Project

Because we teach in "different cultures" --a rural junior high and a comprehensive liberal arts college--our collaborating might have been difficult. It wasn't. We share a belief in student ability and a commitment to teaching that makes such a project easy. We have also evolved the following "rules," some of which are certainly not new with us.

1. MAKE IT EASY TO DO. If the logistics are cumbersome, you may be tempted later in the year to give up.
2. MAKE IT A PART OF WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO DO ANYWAY. Don't make it an "add on" to your other responsibilities.
3. BE FLEXIBLE. Somebody's going to get sick, move away, drop the course.
4. BE COMMITTED TO SEEING IT THROUGH. If you aren't, your students will know. If YOU don't value the writing exchange, the students certainly won't.
5. At the beginning of the exchange BE SURE EACH PERSON SENDS AND RECEIVES A LETTER. You may not be able to hold to that pattern throughout, but starting off right is essential, even with adults.
6. BUILD IN SOME TIME TO STEP BACK AND LOOK AT WHAT'S GOING ON. Keep it simple: write down your observations in a journal; ask questions orally and write down your students' responses; use written questions, particularly open-ended ones. Keep copies of everything, including the correspondence. Later, a second or third look will give you a clearer idea of just what happened. The students too need the experience of stepping back and assessing what happened; they get a larger view than just the one letter at a time they have focussed on during the project.
7. HAVE A PURPOSE IN WRITING BEYOND THE LETTER EXCHANGE. If you don't, the letters will become trivial exchanges, repetitions of questions asked and answered.

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